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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between self-concept variables and academic achievement in 72 African American inner-city high school students. The self-concept variable of particular interest was racial self-concept, those perceptions about the self that develop as a result of racial identity. The hypothesis that racial and global self-concept would predict academic achievement was supported, with racial self-concept accounting for more of the explained variance in achievement than global self-concept. The results suggest that negative self-perceptions, especially those related to racial identity, may be an underlying factor in patterns of underachievement prevalent in African American children. (Contains 13 references.) (Author)

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Racial and Global Self Concept Effects on African American Achievement

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between self concept variables and academic achievement in 72 African American inner-city high school students. The self concept variable of particular interest was racial self concept, those perceptions about the self which develop as a result of racial identity. The hypothesis that racial and global self concept would predict academic achievement was supported, with racial self concept accounting for more of the explained variance in achievement than global self concept. The results suggest that negative self perceptions, especially those related to racial identity, may be an underlying factor in patterns of underachievement prevalent in African American children.

Racial and Global Self Concept Effects on African American Achievement

Standardized achievement test scores reveal that on the average African American school children do not perform as well academically as do other racial groups. Although academic achievement is a multifaceted process, and there are diverse explanations for inadequate performance, the scope of this research was confined to the role that self perceptions play.

The relationship between self concept variables and academic achievement has been investigated over a number of years with mixed results. A number of researchers have found a significant positive relationship (Haynes, Hamilton-Lee & Comer, 1987; Jordan, 1981; Kugle, Clements & Powell, 1983), but others have not (Caliste, 1984; Demo & Parker, 1986; Williams, 1973). Inconsistencies in the research may be due to the choice of self concept measures. For example, in many of the studies that failed to find a relationship, global self concept inventories were used which appraised overall perceptions of self (Demo & Parker, 1986; Williams, 1973). Some studies, using a more specific dimension of self concept, such as self concept of academic ability, did find a relationship (Jordan, 1981; Marsh, Smith, & Barnes, 1985).

The present research was based on the premise that self concept of academic ability may be influenced by another dimension of global self concept, racial self concept. Racial self concept embodies the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions one has about oneself as a member of a particular racial or ethnic group. When

one belongs to a racial group that is valued by the rest of society, the racial component of the self concept is enhanced. However, when one is of an ethnic or racial group that is denigrated by others, racial self concept may be affected negatively (Purkey, 1967; Robinson, 1989). In other words, societal perceptions may become internalized as part of the self concept.

African American children, who often encounter negative racial stereotyping, especially of their abilities to succeed academically, are at risk for developing negative racial self concepts, which may undermine their ability to achieve academically. It was therefore hypothesized in the current research study that academic performance would be negatively affected in African American children who displayed poor racial self concepts. Specifically, high racial self concept was expected to predict high academic achievement. The study also hypothesized that global self concept would be positively related to achievement, but that racial self concept would be a better predictor.

Further, racial identity, current intellectual ability, religious involvement, and gender were considered as possible moderator variables of either the dependent variable, the independent variable or both.

First, an interaction effect between racial identity and racial self concept was expected since the effect of racial self concept on academic achievement would depend upon how closely one

identified with his or her racial group. Individuals with poor racial identity would not necessarily see the perceived characteristics of their racial group as belonging to them. Thus self concept may not be affected (Rosenberg & Kaplan, 1982).

Also, church attendence has been positively linked to both higher self esteem and higher grade point averages in African Americans (Williams, 1987). Therefore, religious involvement was expected to be positively related to academic performance in this study.

Gender differences in achievement and self esteem also have been noted in research studies. Although girls tend to perform better than boys academically, they generally report lower self esteem (Demo & Parker, 1986). That tendency is expected in this study as well. And lastly, intellectual ability was considered since it natually affects achievement.

Method

Subjects

Seventy two African American students (27 male, 45 female) from two inner city high schools in New Jersey volunteered to participate. A monetary incentive was used to encourage involvement. The mean age of the study sample was 15 (*SD* = .94). The students were in the ninth grade when selected; however, 22 had passed into the tenth grade by the time they were actually tested.

Measures

Dependent variables. Five indicators of academic achievement were used for the dependent variables: grade point average;

standardized math, English, and reading achievement scores; and the raw score from the Vocabulary subtest of the Shipley Institute of Living Scale (Shipley, 1940).

Independent variables. The independent variable racial self concept was measured by a racial self concept index derived from subjects' ratings on the Private and Public subscales of the Collective Self-Esteen Scale (CSES, Luhtanen & Crocker, 1990) and a racial self concept scale devised by the investigator. The independent variable global self concept was measured by subjects' ratings on the School Short Form of the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1967).

Moderator variables. Racial identity was measured by a racial identity index derived from subjects' ratings on the Identity and Membership subscales of the CSES (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1990) and a racial identity scale devised by the investigator.

Current intellectual ability was measured using subjects' scores from the Abstract subtest of the Shipley Institute of Living Scale.

To measure religious involvement, subjects were asked to record on the demographic form the number of times per month they attended religious services or participated in other religious activies. Gender was also recorded on the form.

Procedure

Students were tested in small groups over the course of two semesters. On entering the test room, students were presented with a packet of materials in the following order: Student consent

form, Demographic form, Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, Collective Self-Esteen Scale, a racial self concept scale, an identity measure, and Shipley Institute of Living Scale.

Analyses. All dependent variables and potential independent variables or predictors were first analysed using a Pearson product-moment correlation matrix. Independent t-tests were performed to determine if there were any significant group differences on the independent or dependent variables as a function of school attended, grade level, or gender.

Finally, scores from the racial self concept index and the global self concept measure along with the relevant moderator variables were used in regression analyses to predict academic achievement. Each of the five academic achievement indicators was used as the dependent variable in separate regression equations.

Results

The hypothesis that global and racial self concept would be positively related to academic achievement in African American students was supported for racial self concept in four of the five achievement measures, and approached significance for reading achievement. The hypothesis was supported for global self concept in only three of the five achievement measures. In addition, regression analyses indicated that racial self concept, but not global self concept, continued to be predictive of academic achievement even after the contributions of racial identity, global self concept, religious involvement, and current intellectual functioning had been accounted for. In other words, racial self

concept added a unique component to the prediction of academic achievement.

In addition, no interaction effects between racial identity and racial self concept were discernible, although racial identity was found to have positive direct effects on grade point averages. Also, religious involvement was a significant predictor of grade point averages, English achievement, and math achievement. For the gender variable, girls had higher grade point averages than boys, but not lower self concept scores, as expected.

Practical Implications

The results suggest that racial attitudes and perceptions African American children have about themselves and the racial group with whom they identify can be an important developmental issue, especially in achievement related problems. The possibility that these children have internalized society's negative views about their intellectual competence is real. Parents, teachers, counselors, and psychologists can be important in helping these children believe that they are as academically capable as others no matter what environmental forces try to set limits on what is possible for them.

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